



PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPE

Humor in the Streets: The Spanish Indignados

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On May 15, 2011, protest marches called by the *Democracia Real Ya* [Real Democracy Now] digital platform with the slogan “We are not products in the hands of politicians and bankers” managed to draw tens of thousands of people all over Spain. In Madrid some of the protesters decided to continue the march with a ‘reclaim the streets’ type of activity, blocking traffic in the center of the city with a sit-down protest. After confrontations with police, which led to some arrests, a group of about 40 people remained at the Puerta del Sol in order to, among other reasons, “support the detainees and continue with the demonstrations”. From this meeting there arose an assembly “with the main idea of creating and maintaining a permanent camp” (Romanos 2013a).

The media have stressed the element of indignation and this is how the movement that emerged from the camps in Madrid and other Spanish cities has become known internationally, the *indignados*. The label makes reference to the book *Indignez-vous! (Time for Outrage!)* by Stéphane Hessel, a writer, diplomat, and concentration camp survivor, who in his book invites readers to recapture the wartime spirit of resistance to the Nazis by rejecting the power of money and markets and by defending values of modern democracy. The media identified

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the book as a main source of inspiration for the Spanish protests. The activists, however, prefer to call themselves the 15M movement in honor of the date that was the starting gun for the movement. Indignation is, without a doubt, a central emotion in the Spanish movement. But anyone who visited the Puerta del Sol in Madrid or any of the other public spaces occupied by the Spanish *indignados* movement since May 2011 might have asked the same question: If the *indignados* are so angry, why are they laughing so much? They even laughed at themselves. Indeed, this seems to be one of the movement's paradoxes, the combination of indignation directed at the 'politicians and bankers' combined with amusing actions and protests.

Humor and indignation

Numerous participants in the protests organized by the 15M movement in the months following May 2011 brought humorous placards they had written at home, while others designed them during the course of the demonstrations. During some protests, there were spaces arranged for creating humorous placards. Some activists organized workshops specifically for the development of collective creativity in the producing of individual or collective banners, in particular for large demonstrations. These workshops were held in public squares or the social centers that have served as meeting places and provided various resources for the *indignados* movement (see Romanos 2013a). Many placards and banners contained humorous messages, which subverted already familiar texts including poems, advertising slogans, film and song titles, public statements, and the language of signs in public spaces (see Minchinela 2011). For example, "*Tu banco, y cada día el de más gente*" [Your bank and the bank of more people every day], presents a play on words based on the fact that 'bank' and 'park bench' are represented by the same word in Spanish. The slogan belongs to an advertisement for a business in the financial sector. The activists altered the advertisement – in this case without having to change its wording, just its location, by placing it on a park bench – to condemn the

high cost of housing and the growing number of evictions of people unable to pay their mortgages.

In a humorous form, the placard "*Tu banco, y cada día el de más gente*" spoke about very serious issues. Every 15 minutes, a family is evicted from their home in Spain because they are unable to meet their mortgage payments; there were 30,034 family home evictions in 2012. The source for this data is the latest Land Registry report, the most reliable source of information given the absence of official statistics that specifically deal with evictions. Similar figures are expected for 2013. This is occurring in a context in which there are 3.4 million homes vacant in Spain (Romanos 2013b). Throughout the past decade, the equivalent of a new home for every newborn person in the country has been constructed. The so-called property bubble and the economic model based on it have aggravated the global economic crisis in Spain, producing an unemployment rate of 27 percent (57 percent among the young) and a poverty rate of 21 percent. This is the context in which a new social movement has managed to mobilize a lot of people against the evictions, attract broad social support, and constitute a continuing challenge to the state (Romanos 2013b).

Creative humorous engagements extended to ironic performances, organized by specific groups. In Madrid, perhaps the most important among these groups was the *Grupo de Teatro 15 de Mayo* [Theater Group May 15], which organized two particularly noteworthy performances in late May and June 2011: the 'funeral of democracy' and the 'aerobics assembly'. The 'funeral of democracy' – a standard performance among social movements – consisted of a funeral procession led by activists dressed up as priests and, behind them, a coffin containing democracy and a group that mourned its death. In Madrid, the procession had several stops where ironic prayers were said in the name of the rights and freedoms lost. The false priests tried to continue to look serious, while those in the procession worked themselves into paroxysms of exaggerated grief. The group performed the 'funeral' in Madrid on May 27, 2011, the day of heavy police repression of the *indignados* in Barcelona –



an event which triggered the immediate solidarity of those participating in other occupied squares throughout Spain – and on June 11, 2011, the day of the swearing in of the newly elected right-wing Mayor of Madrid – an event which caused fierce clashes between activists and the police.

The ‘aerobics assembly’ took place before the 15M general assembly at Puerta del Sol, when the camp was still present (it broke up on June 12, 2011) and the assemblies were massive. A group of activists dressed up in tacky gym clothes took over the assembly and, after performing a series of exercises to practice the various gestures used in the assembly, developed a ridiculous argument about, for example, how to reform one of their kitchens. The ‘aerobics’ arose from the internal

conflicts generated in the camp about the decision to abandon or maintain it. The performance mocked the problems associated with the assembly, e.g., the continual blockages in decision-making, and the endless debates about the internal structure of the movement and the taking of decisions at its heart. It also had a didactic function: the performance showed how a consensus could be arrived at that would include elements of all the proposals made by participants.

Humorous performances served to cool tempers during moments of great stress caused by the intervention of the police, as in the ‘funeral of democracy’, or it mediated internal disagreements, as in ‘aerobics assembly’. Both performances also served to facilitate emotional union within the 15M group, return the movement its lost creativity, and attract media attention, as the activists themselves recognize in their documents (Romanos 2013a). According to Meyer (2000), one of the most important functions of humor in communication is the identification between the communicator and the audience, enhancing speaker credibility and building group cohesiveness. In the 15M movement the identification function was consciously tackled and strengthened in performances in which the members of the group laughed at themselves through the exaggeration of a situation or a behavior to the point of ridiculousness (e.g., the continual blockages in the taking of decisions and the endless discussions). Spectators recognized themselves in the situation or behavior portrayed, which strengthened their capacity for self-criticism.

Humorous activism

Humor is present in 15M internal documents. One of the most notable cases comes from the documents produced by the World Extension Team (WET) of *Acampadasol* [the camp in Puerta del Sol, Madrid]. This commission was set up during the first days of the camp with the objective of disseminating and coordinating the *indignados* movement at the international level. On August 17, 2011, the commission launched the *Proyecto Acta* [Minutes Project], an initiative to draw up the minutes of the commission’s meetings

in a fun way, as if they were a tale incorporating elements of what was going on around them. In general, the names of the participants in the assemblies were substituted for pseudonyms that, in addition to preserving their identity, served to create ‘characters’ in the story.

With *Proyecto Acta*, the members of the group consciously sought to use another ‘language’ that would in some way contribute to lowering the costs of activism related to fatigue. For four months the initiative allowed other members of the group and other participants in the movement to read the minutes with greater interest. The use of humor in the writing of the minutes helped members of the group get involved in one of the most boring tasks connected to the minutes, that is, writing them. The use of this ‘language’ contributed to making a game of what at the start would have been seen as a form of work. Thus, the entertainment associated with the game proved useful for group development and the maintaining of organized efforts (see Shepard 2011).

Proyecto Acta also helped to lower tensions in the WET commission by providing an opportunity to communicate possible critiques and dissatisfaction in a less conflicting way. Humor is a form of communication that is particularly useful in situations “in which a more serious and direct mode runs the risk of being too confrontational, potentially embarrassing, or otherwise risky” (Martin 2007, 17). It is not only about lowering tensions, such as in the case of ironic performances mentioned above, but also about communicating a criticism without the level of tension rising as a result. In the WET commission one of the sources of tension was, for example, a lack of punctuality.

Finally, *Proyecto Acta* served to reinforce the internal cohesion of the commission through jokes that made use of codes shared among its members. These codes were sometimes used to ridicule the actions or position of rival external actors (e.g., the police) and, surely more importantly, of groups within the movement with which members of WET had disagreements. According to Meyer, “people laugh outwardly or inwardly at others because they feel some sort of triumph over them or feel

superior in some way to them” (Meyer 2000, 314). By clarifying the identity of those who are different and hostile, and clarifying what makes them different and hostile (often the subject of mockery), group members in turn strengthen their collective identity and promote internal cohesion. Obviously, the cost of this form of humor is the distancing of those not related to the group. This is one of the most visible contradictory interpersonal functions of humor: it improves social cohesion but excludes individuals from outside the group.

Culture jammers

‘Culture jamming’ refers to a symbolic strategy by way of which anti-corporate activists make use of diverse artistic techniques (e.g., appropriation, collage, ironic inversion, juxtaposition) to change the original discourse of corporate advertising by altering corporate symbols (logos, slogans, etc.) visually and thus giving them a new meaning. Among the most common of these tactics are billboard pirating, physical and virtual graffiti, and website alteration (Juris 2008). The Spanish *indignados* relied on the so-called ‘creatives’ and ‘radical community managers’ – professionals who do not situate themselves outside of the movement but rather form part of it, in some cases playing a central and active role. The term ‘creative’ refers to all those designers, illustrators, and other professionals or experts in advertising and the visual arts, who have put their expertise at the service of the movement. For their part, the radical community managers have applied their skills in promoting online content to disseminate the messages and images of the creatives while contributing other techniques brought in from culture jamming. For example, they created false Twitter accounts that supplanted the identities of certain people and ridiculed the behavior of the police and the authorities.

The Twitter account *@acampadapolicia* [*@policecamp*] was created on August 2, 2011, after the police cleared the Puerta del Sol of demonstrators, closed off access to the square, and used violence against those trying to get in. Some activists started to tweet “as if the police

were encamped in the center of the square, with their problems, their celebrations, their demands and necessities.” This account received a rapid and positive response. Among the objectives of the account recognized by one of its creators was to counteract the rigidity suffered by the movement. The conscious search for greater resonance was another of the motivations that led this ‘radical community manager’ to participate in the account’s creation (Grueso 2011). The fake Twitter account can be seen as a form of the ‘identity correction’ technique and as a form of parody, used by other culture jammers, such as the Yes Men, who “impersonate corporate and government spokespeople so as to expose their ‘true’ character and thereby spread anti-capitalist messages” (Firat and Kuryel 2010, 10).

Conclusions

The use of humor helped the Spanish *indignados* to achieve a series of objectives, namely: i) to identify problems within and outside

the movement and draw the attention of its participants – actual and potential – to them; ii) to cool tempers during moments of great stress; iii) to cause onlookers to identify with the demands of the movement; iv) to lower the costs of activism related to fatigue; v) to communicate possible internal anger and criticism in a less dramatic and conflictual way; vi) to reinforce internal cohesion; and vii) to ridicule opponents. The Spanish *indignados* used humor in organizing workshops to promote imaginative and ironic messages on placards; organizing performances to explicitly seek an emotional connection to the public; developing specific humor-driven initiatives within the committees; and advertising and distributing their messages on Internet.

Humor has remained present in the actions of the Spanish *indignados* in spite of the relative decline suffered by the movement in terms of participation and social support since May 2011. Many Spanish *indignados* have no problem in acknowledging that they are participating in a



movement that is provisional and in a permanent state of construction. The recognition of shared insecurities and ambivalences through humor may be yet another element that differentiates the current movement from previous, more 'serious' ones. If, as claimed by Flesher Fominaya (2007), the recognition of humor's potential for subversion in political activism was a relatively new concept in Spanish movement circles in the early 2000s, what we have learned from our study of the 15M movement leads us to think that this is no longer the case. There is no doubt that the

activists' ability to use humor in organizing and coordinating protests with a high level of media impact contributed decisively to the success of the demonstrations on May 15, 2011, and that of the social movement that grew out of it (Romanos 2013a). Although consideration of this point falls beyond the scope of this article, it may not be excessive to think that perception of a supposed rupture with 'typical' protests of the past may have facilitated the participation of people with no history or no recent history of activism in the new movement.

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